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Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta

Did They Forget About Qaddafi?

The hostile response of most Western European governments to the U.S. raid on Libya puzzled and angered many Americans, who supported the military strike as a long-overdue attempt to cool Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's ardor for international terrorism. Libyan oil money has financed antigovernment terrorist groups from the Philippines to Ireland.

Our associate Lucette Lagnado has reviewed classified State Department cables obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. They might well serve as a reminder to our querulous European allies of the threat Qaddafi has posed.

■ Italy. An intelligence team concluded that Italy is "a country which has witnessed the largest number of Libyan assassination attempts." One of the violent incidents occurred in February 1981, when "at least two but possibly five Libyan gunmen opened fire in . . . Rome's Fiumicino Airport, wounding a number of Arabs." The cable noted that "Libyan assassins have killed or wounded a number of Libyan dissidents in Italy."

The intelligence summary went on to describe several other attacks, which Italian police believed were "part of a campaign of intimidation launched by Qaddafi against political opponents abroad."

Later in 1981, the consulate in Milan cabled: "Italy's military intelligence service . . . turned up evidence at the end of May that Libya and Palestinians have supplied weapons . . . to Italian terrorists." The Italian police had uncovered a plot by terrorist leader Oreste Scalzone,

who was "thought to have received funds from the Libyans to establish a radio station and 'cultural centers' in Rome/Naples vicinity."

The Italians later made a separate peace with the terrorist community, allowing assassins unhindered transit through Italy in return for a promise to let Italians alone. Even after this pact with the devil was breached by the seizure of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro and the bloody attack on the Rome airport, Italian leaders still managed to express shock and dismay when the United States decided to try a different antiterrorism tactic.

■ France. It's probably unfair to suggest that France's refusal to allow U.S. planes to fly over French soil reflected sympathy for state-sponsored terrorism. But surely there is little to substantiate the French leaders' claim that the reason they didn't support the U.S. attack was because it wasn't tough enough.

In January 1984, according to a State Department cable, threatening letters were received in the West Berlin offices of the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse with "a message to the French people."

The letters, from a group calling itself "The Armed Arab Struggle," warned cryptically that "not only our children will cry to the memory of the martyrs of Baalbek." The reference was to the French air strikes in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, in which many civilians were killed. The raid had been in retaliation for the suicide bombing of the French military base at Beirut Airport in October 1983, at the same time as

the terrorist destruction of the U.S. Marine barracks there.

The last part of the cable is particularly interesting in light of the discotheque bombing in West Berlin, which was the immediate cause of the air strike at Libya: "Information recorded by the U.S. military police on duty . . . indicated that a blue Mercedes with East German diplomatic license plates entered West Berlin. Because of other evidence they have suggesting a Libyan involvement, West Berlin police suspect that this vehicle may have been used to bring the letters to West Berlin for mailing."

■ Greece. Another shrill critic of the U.S. attack on Libya was the Greek government. Yet Qaddafi's assassins have struck Libyan dissidents in Greece repeatedly over the years. A cable of July 1984 describes in gruesome detail the punishment meted out to two young Libyan students whose only crime was to be opposed to Qaddafi.

Their bodies were discovered in their Athens apartment by a third student. They had been "shot five times with a pistol" equipped, assassin-style, with a silencer. One of the students had been "beaten, strangled and gagged before being shot twice in the back."

Other cables report that Qaddafi's reckless expenditure of millions to foment rebellion included support of such terrorist groups as the Basque Fatherland in Spain, the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the Baader-Meinhof Gang in West Germany.

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